

**Divergent Priorities, Diverging Visions:
Lesbian Separatist versus Gay Male Integrationist Ideology
surrounding Duke in the 1970s and 80s**

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I don't want to be integrated.¹

When I am overwhelmed by hassles permeating an environment which is too, too infrequently supportive of me, when I lose the will to fight oppressive forces, I live within myself, passively. But I want to flow with all women. [...] I have a vision of a woman's world, and in it this circle of energy will become a total environment in which we can become the women of our most visionary fantasies, and beyond.²

The consciousness we want Sinister Wisdom to express is -- briefly -- that of the lesbian or lunatic who embraces her boundary/criminal status, with the aim of creating a new species in a new time/space.³

And then purified I watched the mysterious tides. I visited the ruins of my father's temple. I found my own bones, I found my self-created soul. I used my mother's words like boosters to rocket me and from invisible space I admired the earth.⁴

Gay people are individuals, not a category.⁵

Originally, the word 'homosexual' was used by doctors to describe clinically physical, sexual acts. Such a word cannot convey a feeling of emotional attachment and of an essentially social relationship. [...] Indeed, one goal of the Gay Movement is the 'end of homosexuality' -- that is, the end of the repressive categories 'homosexual,' 'bisexual,' and 'heterosexual,' and the beginning of feeling free simply to Be Oneself. In that sense, Gay Liberation is everyone's Liberation.⁶

Gay men and women at Duke are not very different from most of you, although most of you probably feel safer believing and feeling that they are.⁷

My own rather cautious and limited experience of being gay in America persuades me that it is a futile and empty gesture to make gayness one's central proposition. Deeper still is the universal experience of being human.⁸

On the one hand: separatist, pioneering, idealistic/utopic, renegade, introspective.

On the other: defensive, redemptive, amicable, solicitous, integrationist. What can account for the differences in style, tone, emphasis, intended audience, and political aim between these two sets of epigraphs- those on the left articulated or circulated by lesbians at Duke and in Durham in the 70 and 80s, compared to those on the right, proclaimed by gay males

¹ Khoo Su Nin. "Lesbians at Duke: Sexual Choice and Political Preference." Voices: The Chronicle's Weekly Magazine. (November 1982). Print.

² Barbara Hedman. "I. Fears and Visions." Gay Morning Star. (April 1974): 2. Print.

³ Harriet Desmoines. "Notes for a Magazine I." Sinister Wisdom. (July 1976):4. Print.

⁴ Cathy Cruikshank. "Opening Conclusion." Sinister Wisdom (July 1976): 60-61. Print.

⁵ "Who Are We?" Gay Morning Star. (March 1973): 1-2. Print.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ "Doin' it at Duke." The Chronicle (15 November 1977):3-6. Print.

⁸ "A Personal Statement." Gay Morning Star. (November 1973): 4. Print.

on the pages of Duke's student newspaper, *The Chronicle*, and gay newsletter, *The Duke Gay Morning Star*, at the same time?

It may seem simplistic to say that for the women, being gay was an *answer*, opening the door to new formulations of community described as soul-nourishing, whereas for males at Duke, being gay was a *problem* to both contend with personally and somehow redeem within a larger (read: heterosexual) social and academic network. And yet, this deduction befits the distinct organizing methods and understandings of identity crafted and employed by the unmistakably-at-odds collectives. Drawing upon the self-published periodicals *Sinister Wisdom* and *The Duke Gay Morning Star*, this essay seeks to understand the discursive and affective differences between what I will call separatist versus integrationist logic, gender's role in the decision to ascribe to one over the other, and what these divergent projects afforded those gays and lesbians who undertook them. The voices of Donna Giles, a lesbian Dukie-cum-Durhamite active in the 70s and 80s, and Steve Schewel, the former president of Associated Students of Duke University who granted charter to Duke's first gay student organization in 1973, will help to further illuminate this period, and, at times, I will put these texts and ideas in conversation with philosophers Luce Irigaray and Michel Foucault, as well as poet/essayist Audre Lorde in order to trace or further elaborate upon their ideological underpinnings.

Let's begin with the nuances of word choice: because they have been historically defined by forces outside of themselves, the way gays and lesbians choose to self-describe is of the utmost importance when seeking to understand their political and ideological intentions. In the epigraphs, there is a marked difference between *Sinister Wisdom*'s language, extolling the "lunatic" and "criminal," and the *Gay Morning Star*'s repudiation of "repressive" sexual identity categories. Whereas the former engages in a re/appropriation

of stigmatizing or pathologizing labels, clearly articulating its constituency's willingness, or even need, to be outcasts, the latter turns instead to a more enigmatic and benign platform of shared humanity, seeking to minimize their difference from straight peers in hopes of acceptance. Shedding the stigma associated with homosexuality- embedded within the very word *homosexual*- was thus of the utmost importance to gay males writing in the Gay Morning Star. And, just as important, was combatting the presumption that individuals attracted to members of their own sex are dissimilar enough from the general population to merit their own distinct categorization.

As Michel Foucault demonstrates in his polemical text The History of Sexuality, words serve to produce reality rather than merely describe it. During the proliferation of discourses about sexuality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sexual practices came under new scrutiny, defined as inherent traits rather than actions. Those to whom such traits were attributed became codified as belonging to a type of "sub-race:"⁹

Through various discourses, legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied; sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness; from childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development was defined and all the possible deviations were carefully described; pedagogical controls and medical treatments were organized; around the least fantasies, moralists, but especially doctors, brandished the whole emphatic vocabulary of abomination.¹⁰

Thus, as rightfully mentioned in the Gay Morning Star epigraph about sexual identity categories, such labels are lingering discursive tools through which institutions like medicine, psychology, and government sought to regulate people. These words carry connotations of disease and disorder, incessantly weighed down by their objectionable legacy. Battling this legacy, which bled into their present reality, was important to those

⁹ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York, NY, 1978. [trans. by Robert Hurley.] 40. Print.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 36.

who wrote in the newsletter not only because they wanted more positive ways of viewing themselves, but primarily because they desired understanding and acceptance from their peers at Duke. While Foucault would undoubtedly disagree that shedding these descriptors necessarily leads to freedom, members of the newsletter believed in the possibility that doing so would free them to simply exist as students like any other.

The inaugural issue of the Gay Morning Star, released in the spring of 1973 by the Duke Gay Alliance only a semester after the student group was chartered, opens with the statement, “We live on your floor in the dorm. We eat with you. We get high with you.”¹¹ That the very first page of the newsletter- its introduction- is addressed directly to heterosexuals evidences the framework within which the Alliance operated: one that sought to engage, critically inform, and ultimately gain comradery and approval from their straight peers. Indeed, these short sentences set up an equivalency between gay students and heterosexual ones: *we’re all the same*. In fact, their focus on the human, the individual, and the liberation of all suggest that for the gay males who founded it, the Duke Gay Alliance was an interim destigmatizing project and not a longing for gay collectivity in and of itself. “Our common goal is to raise our own consciousness-level in order to raise that of our community, academic and otherwise” a member of the DGA says in The Gay Morning Star’s “Editor’s Note,” stressing the organization’s ultimate orientation towards Duke as a whole.¹² He elaborates, “Gay solidarity, a sense of belonging, and shared friendships are an excellent and necessary beginning.”¹³ Beginning, here, is the keyword that gives it all away: rather an internal focus on fostering gay community, these students desired a type of

¹¹ “Who Are We?” Gay Morning Star. (March 1973): 1-2. Print.

¹² Phil W. “Editor’s Note.” Gay Morning Star. (November 1973): 1. Print.

¹³ *ibid*

success and survival predicated upon a reciprocal relationship with institution of Duke, and it's entire undergraduate population.

Such a relationship would be difficult to come by if we understand campus culture as at all similar to the perspective of "Jack Preiss, a sociology professor who specializes in 'deviant' behavior,"¹⁴ The Chronicle tells us. The professor "attempts to educate students on the problems of homosexuality," the article goes on to say, revealing that homosexuality, problem, and deviant might be used interchangeably on campus at this time. Indeed, many people were openly antagonistic, including Duke University President Terry Sanford. In the same article, he is indicted as refusing to consider adding sexual orientation to the schools employment anti-discrimination policy and attempting to withhold funding for DGA's original charter, although student government had already approved the charter. Steve Schewel, ASDU's president at the time, had a "heartfelt conversation" with Sanford.¹⁵ "I don't remember the specific conversation," Steve says, "only that he wanted to talk to me to convince me that the student legislature should not promote this sort of thing. He felt sorry for gay men and lesbians, felt that they were somehow misguided."¹⁶ The President of the University felt homosexuality was "morally wrong," something "that people ought to stop doing" Schewel recalls.¹⁷ And as if these personal biases weren't enough, The Chronicle aired a few sentences serving to remind us that North Carolina Law was also against homosexuality. Reese Trimmer, legal advisor for the Durham Police Department, is quoted, saying sex between males, especially, was criminalized, and still considered an

¹⁴ Karen Ebert. "Homosexuals at Duke Find Life Difficult." The Chronicle. (19 Oct 1976): 3. Print.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Steve Schewel. "RE: Interview Request from Duke Women's Studies Senior." Message to the author. 29 Apr. 2013. E-mail.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

“‘abominable and detestable’ crime against nature.”¹⁸ This attitude as well permeated campus, and led to a refusal of DGA’s request for charter renewal in 1983. The new set of student governors cited concern about the promotion of illegal acts.¹⁹

These types of sentiments are what the Duke Gay Alliance organized in response to. “‘Gay people are sick.’ That is a total misconception,” writes an anonymous contributor in a piece titled “Great Myths of the Western World.”²⁰ Such statements appeared frequently in the Gay Morning Star, in line with its mission “to demystify Gayness, to refute the persistent myths.”²¹ While the articles at times address other gay students, they maintain a clear objective of challenging the attitudes of those who dominate the social climate at Duke. While it is predictable that an organization for gay students would want to provide therapy to its members in order to ease these difficulties²², DGA took on the additional challenge of advising and offering counseling to their straight peers who experienced “problems regarding homosexuality” as well, with the expressed purpose of “provid[ing] information to those persons needing facts or opinions about homosexuality” and “educat[ing] the community of Duke University and the larger community about homosexuality.”²³ The group wanted “to allow everyone to understand and respect” gay students, and they were correspondingly intent on being likeable, relatable, and educational.²⁴ They spoke to undergraduate Human Sexuality classes as well as those in the Nursing School, and broadcasted a program on Duke’s WDBS campus radio station, toward these ends.²⁵ A Chairman of DGA even wrote, in 1974, that the organization stood for an “affirmation of

¹⁸ Karen Ebert. “Homosexuals at Duke Find Life Difficult.” The Chronicle. (19 Oct 1976): 3. Print.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ “Great Myths of the Western World.” Gay Morning Star. (March 1973): 1-2. Print.

²¹ Who Are We?” Gay Morning Star. (March 1973): 1-2. Print.

²² Student Organizations of Duke University, by The Office of Student Activities. (Jan 1973). Print.

²³ Karen Ebert. “Homosexuals at Duke Find Life Difficult.” The Chronicle. (19 Oct 1976): 3. Print.

²⁴ Who Are We?” Gay Morning Star. (March 1973): 1-2. Print.

²⁵ Gay Morning Star. (April 1974). Print.

love and sexual expression between members of the same, as well as the opposite, gender,” appealing once again to a human commonality that might change the rampant homophobic views on campus.²⁶

As I mentioned briefly, this focus on appealing to the general Duke population stands in stark contrast to the lesbians, who, in the epigraphs and elsewhere, express that finding and organizing with each other was an *end* rather than a *means*. When writers of the Gay Morning Star redirect emphasis from identity labels and sex acts to social bonds and “feelings of emotional attachment,”²⁷ they do so in order to solicit empathy and a feeling of commonality from the heterosexual Duke audience. The lesbians’ emphasis on bonds between women serves, contrarily, to consolidate themselves as a distinct group rather than make them palatable to a larger public. It was the tension between these two models that led women to splinter from the Duke Gay Alliance less than two years after its inception and create the Lesbian Rap Group, which markedly severed its ties with Duke altogether to later become Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists.²⁸ It was this tension that led the Duke Gay Alliance, originally comprised of “approximately one third”²⁹ women, to become, by the early 80s, completely free of female participation- despite changing its name to Duke Gay and Lesbian Alliance in an effort to combat this very trend.³⁰

So what was it about Duke that gay women found unbearable, but gay males aspired towards? What was the Duke culture they were both reacting to, and how did it inform their modes of organizing? An understanding of campus culture in the 70s and 80s foremost helps to put the approach of the Duke Gay Alliance into perspective, illuminating

²⁶ Tom Benson. “Spring Report.” Gay Morning Star. (April 1974): 5. Print.

²⁷ “Who Are We?” Gay Morning Star. (March 1973): 1-2. Print.

²⁸ Jess McDonald. “Narrative History of LGBT Life at Duke.” Center for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Life, Duke Student Affairs. Web <<http://studentaffairs.duke.edu/lgbt/about-us/narrative-history-lgbt-life-duke>>

²⁹ Who Are We?” Gay Morning Star. (March 1973): 1-2. Print.

³⁰ Tandy Solomon. “Homosexuality at Duke.” Voices: The Chronicle’s Weekly Magazine. (Nov 1982).

the types of privilege at play in the undergrad world to which they desired access; conversely, these same aspects of Duke were largely perceived as negative by lesbian students, helping to explain why their priority was creating alternative spaces.

Betsy Barton, a lesbian who attended Duke in the late 70s and shared her experience during a public panel, described the culture as extremely homogenized, and recalled phoning home, bewildered, to complain that “all the guys are wearing **whale shorts**.”³¹ Donning pastel-colored bottoms with small animals printed on them, these young men ascribed to an aesthetic best described as ‘preppy,’ with all its connotations of conservatism, arrogance, and obsession with success and reputation. The social scene was a “boys’ club”³² Barton said, the Women’s and Men’s colleges having only merged in 1972 and women still appendages to a male-centric institution.³³ She took issue with the pale pink skirts so popular on campus they almost, to her, seemed a uniform, and felt ostracized by women’s heavy focus on their femininity- a prerequisite to social (and perhaps academic) success. “At Duke, group consensus is more important than independent thinking,” Leslie Tobin, who graduated and became a member of Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists, adds.³⁴ Much of campus culture revolved around the sorority and fraternity scene, wherein “there’s an obligation to abhor ‘queers,’” she laments.³⁵ Her words appeared in a 1976 The Chronicle article titled, straightforwardly and tellingly, “Homosexuals at Duke Find Life Difficult.” A year later, despite the Duke Gay Alliance’s nearly-five-year presence on campus, similar complaints were again aired:

³¹ Betsy Barton. The Power of This Story: A Public Conversation about Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality in Durham, NC 1960-1990. Duke University, Durham, NC. 20 Mar. 2013. Panel.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Women at Duke." *University Archives in the David M. Rubenstein Library*. Duke University Libraries, n.d. Web. <<http://library.duke.edu/uarchives/exhibits/women-history/>>.

³⁴ Karen Ebert. "Homosexuals at Duke Find Life Difficult." The Chronicle. (19 Oct 1976): 3. Print.

³⁵ *ibid.*

I don't know if straight people feel the kind of brittle social atmosphere that we encounter or not. It might have something to do with the architecture, who knows, but there is something very peculiar about this campus. There is very little conscious effort to overcome the rigidity of social patterns.³⁶

Given this snapshot of Duke, it isn't surprising that many gay students tried as hard as possible to conform to their peers' expectations. The ostracization one might experience for challenging campus norms was palpable. Evoking images of torturous loneliness and forced segregation, the original president of DGA, John Martin, said "being gay at Duke can be compared to solitary confinement."³⁷ "There's nothing more uncomfortable than being placed in a cubbyhole, to have one aspect of the whole personality be the thing people identify when they meet you," another gay male student elaborates in a Chronicle exposé about 'coming out' at Duke.³⁸ Such feelings of being sequestered and pigeonholed help to explain why resisting categorization and presenting instead as 'human' was DGA's approach to being gay at Duke. The university's homogenous culture, revolving around a narrowly conceived 'ideal' student steeped in traditional gender roles and expectations, left gay students to realize there was little room to present themselves as different, much less as radical, and be treated with respect. To gain acceptance, if that was their goal, they needed to appeal to what one member of the Duke Gay Alliance jokingly, but seriously, termed a "straighter-than-thou" culture.³⁹

In light of this information, it is important to realize that many gay male students weren't simply concerned about lacking a supportive social circle- if that were the case they might have been satisfied, as many lesbians were, finding each other. They actually

³⁶ Howard Goldberg. "Gay Students Answer Questions on Dealing with 'Coming Out.'" The Chronicle. (15 Nov 1977): 3-6. Print

³⁷ Karen Ebert. "Homosexuals at Duke Find Life Difficult." The Chronicle. (19 Oct 1976): 3. Print.

³⁸ Howard Goldberg. "Gay Students Answer Questions on Dealing with 'Coming Out.'" The Chronicle. (15 Nov 1977): 3-6. Print

³⁹ C. Stillman. "Growing Up Gay at Duke." Gay Morning Star. (Nov 1973):1-3. Print.

aspired towards the typically 'Duke' notion of success that caused their difficulties in the first place- a success including both social and professional components, characterized in either case by conformity. A member of the Duke Gay Alliance offers the following description of Duke students, which can apply to both straight and gay undergraduates and is not specified:

now more than ever, students at Duke tend to arrive with a more consistently upper-middle-class, professionally-oriented attitude than, say, those at UNC; students here are less interested in an education than in paving the way to law school or medicine, areas where pressure for academic and social conformity is particularly acute and there is little room for experiment.⁴⁰

Experimenting, indeed, was not in the interests of the Duke Gay Alliance, unlike those lesbians who broke from the organization with 'visions' and 'fantasies.' Ascribing to Duke's success-obsessed culture, gay males were invested in the prestige and respectability accompanying the Duke brand and experience. As males, they likely viewed their gayness as the only barrier to these privileges, whereas women were already marginalized within campus culture regardless of their sexuality, their access always already hindered.

Accordingly, for gay males, accruing social capital in predictable ways (through academic success and social integration) took precedence over radical activism that challenged these priorities themselves. By 1982, one student openly expressed his dissatisfaction with the priorities of the Duke Gay Alliance and its subscription, rather than resistance, to Duke's professionally-oriented assimilationist culture, saying, "At this point in time, we have no one to blame about the oppression of homosexuals except ourselves, because we're too busy trying to get into law school and we don't want to screw up."⁴¹ He continues: "[Duke] is a conservative school and gays are simply too practical to make a

⁴⁰ C. Stillman. "Growing Up Gay at Duke." Gay Morning Star. (Nov 1973):3. Print

⁴¹ Tandy Solomon. "Homosexuality at Duke." Voices: The Chronicle's Weekly Magazine. (Nov 1982).

statement"- practical in the sense that they were attached to what Duke had to offer, not willing to risk their social reputations or professional futures to 'rock the boat,' or at the very least, resist pandering to heterosexuals for acceptance.⁴² And so "the problem for gays at Duke" was not "how to survive as homosexuals, but how best to live as human beings,"⁴³ where human is, of course, coded as male. Attempting to erase the stigma of gayness from their bodies, these students desired a place in the dominant world of their straight male peers.

Women, however, did not have same access to this argument of being 'just humans' on a campus that de-segregated same year the Duke Gay Alliance was chartered, nor were they interested in making such claims. In April of 1974, the Gay Morning Star contained a front-page article addressing the Duke Gay Alliance's "internal stress:" the needs of certain individuals were at odds with the group's "general, long-term goals," it revealed.⁴⁴ Indeed, most of the lesbians were simply disinterested in fighting to win the hearts and minds of their heterosexual peers at Duke, taking issue with the conservative campus culture itself as well DGA's expressed desire to partake in, and be recognized by, it. They yearned instead for alternative forms of community that focused internally, on caring for and nourishing one another, and were critical of male-dominated spaces and movements. The article matter-of-factly states:

Many gay women are finding that they derive greater sustenance-- both as homosexuals and as women-- in the feminist movement than in 'gay liberation' as initially organized and developed by men. As a result many of the women in DGA have preferred to transfer their allegiance and their political energies to local Lesbian-feminist groups.⁴⁵

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ C. Stillman. "Growing Up Gay at Duke." Gay Morning Star. (Nov 1973):1-3. Print

⁴⁴ "The Lesbian-Feminist and the Gay Woman." Gay Morning Star. (April 1974): 1. Print.

⁴⁵ "The Lesbian-Feminist and the Gay Woman." Gay Morning Star. (April 1974): 1. Print.

Barbara Hedman, a Duke student who's epigraph above is taken from the same issue of the Gay Morning Star, explains that she envisions a "women's world" as the anecdote to "an environment too infrequently supportive," no doubt speaking of both Duke in general and of DGA.⁴⁶ "I am growing increasingly extreme in my perspective, in my expectations and analysis; yet everyday I accept and 'tolerate' a reality much less rigorous," she says, speaking of her growing the feminist consciousness and corresponding disappointment in what Duke has to offer. She does on to say, "I have made a decision to immerse myself in women's culture and I find that I have no time for, or support for, the man's world, insofar as there is a choice." In a move characteristic of lesbian separatism, rather than continuing to live amongst and combat her oppressors- including gay men- she states her preference for a "total environment" of those who share her experience as women and her womanly "energy."⁴⁷

"Turned off by Duke life and the Duke social scene," these women wanted real alternatives.⁴⁸ Many things were changing for women at Duke, but rather than be satisfied with the bare minimum, students like Barbara became inspired to seek something altogether greater- not to mention the fact that "for many men," Steve Schewel says, "the rising of the women came as a surprise. Many of us embraced it, but many did not."⁴⁹ He explains that "women won equal social regulations (off-campus privileges, curfews, etc.), equal admissions opportunities (when East and West campuses were mixed by gender so that the number of women wasn't constrained by the smaller campus they were located

⁴⁶ Barbara Hedman. "I. Fears and Visions." Gay Morning Star. (April 1974): 2. Print.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Khoo Su Nin. "Lesbians at Duke: Sexual Choice and Political Preference." Voices: The Chronicle's Weekly Magazine. (November 1982). Print.

⁴⁹ Steve Schewel. "RE: Interview Request from Duke Women's Studies Senior." Message to the author. 29 Apr. 2013. E-mail.

on), and so much more.”⁵⁰ Yet, Schewel himself, who actively contributed to some of these changes as the president of Duke’s student government, was not free of the gender bias so prevalent on campus, saying, literally, “it was interesting to discover that women were people.”⁵¹ Lesbians found it much more fulfilling, then, to validate one another rather than fight the uphill battle of changing attitudes toward both their sexuality and gender. Many began to define themselves as “women-identified women,” shares Donna Giles, who recently shared her experience on the same panel about race, class, gender and sexuality as Schewel.⁵² Giles was a member of the Lesbian Rap Group in the 70s, wherein she came to define the woman-identified woman as one “who didn’t gain her sense of identity and value or worthiness simply from her relations with men or from what men thought, or from the traditional roles culture forced upon her, and had a sense of value apart from that.”⁵³ But this movement wasn’t characterized simply by a refusal of dominant culture’s attitudes and expectations; it was also defined very positively such that women shared special and unique “characteristics” from which their worth stemmed, sometimes thought to be intrinsic only to their gender.⁵⁴

Audre Lorde describes these intrinsically womanly characteristics as the ‘erotic.’ What exactly is the erotic? It is a nonrational, intuitive knowledge; it is a type of sensitizing and harmonizing energy; it a woman’s very capacity for joy and the seat of her innermost desires. It also has a compulsory quality; once it is experienced we become aware of a level of fullness and completeness so far beyond mere sensation or obligation that a longing for

⁵⁰ Steve Schewel. "RE: Interview Request from Duke Women's Studies Senior." Message to the author. 29 Apr. 2013. E-mail.

⁵¹ Steve Schewel. *The Power of This Story: A Public Conversation about Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality in Durham, NC 1960-1990*. Durham County Library, Durham, NC. 3 Apr. 2013. Panel.

⁵² Telephone interview of Dona Giles, by the author. 14 Apr. 2013.

⁵³ Telephone interview of Dona Giles, by the author. 14 Apr. 2013.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

the proliferation of this excellent self-love and self-regard ensues.⁵⁵ This sounds a lot like what lesbian feminists at Duke found in each other and the separatist community they created. While I previously associated the words ‘outcast’ and ‘renegade’ with these women in order to contrast their priorities with those of gay males, they were clearly focused so intentionally inward that even these terms seem too externally oriented to capture the entirely separate “woman’s world” they created.⁵⁶ Of the fine line they treaded between positioning themselves in opposition to patriarchy and concentrating their energy positively on each other instead, it can be said that these lesbian-feminists practiced a politics of newness and alternative that was only *predicated* upon an escape from and avoidance of normative social structures. “I found my own bones, I found my self-created soul,” one woman says, poetically articulating the value of lesbian separatism.⁵⁷ Rather than trying to engage directly with the men’s culture, she describes herself as “purified” of it.⁵⁸ These lesbians’ concerns about patriarchal structures certainly undergirded their actions, but their attitude is ultimately best described positively, as a celebration of women. As Donna describes, “I was introduced to this feeling –just the feeling, and it’s indescribable- of there being women who were FOR women. It was an emotional rush, just a spirit of... I don’t know, I just felt so liberated and free and so accepted and allowed to be! I never felt that before. I didn’t feel it in my own family and my family loved me.”⁵⁹ While it is not a stretch to say men were an articulated enemy of the feminist lesbian movement at Duke and in Durham during this time, the women creatively and actively build an alternate subculture to which said men were ultimately unimportant. “I care more about myself,”

⁵⁵ Audre Lorde. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1984. 53-59. Print.

⁵⁶ Barbara Hedman. “I. Fears and Visions.” *Gay Morning Star*. (April 1974): 2. Print.

⁵⁷ Cathy Cruikshank. “Opening Conclusion.” *Sinister Wisdom* (July 1976): 60-61. Print.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Telephone interview of Donna Giles, by the author. 14 Apr. 2013.

one lesbian writes in the Gay Morning Star about why women-only spaces are so valuable to her, “and my vital life energy blossoms.”⁶⁰

These statements stand in stark contrast to those of gay males at Duke at the time. The women were much more personally affected by their organizing, with themselves at the center, than members of the Duke Gay Alliance who worried that cherishing their identity as unique or concentrating their energy within the collective would diminish their ability to mix in as equals at Duke. One such member says, “it matters more to discern and affirm the experience of loneliness as a common malady of American life,” than “to create a gay cadre of self-defense which implicitly accepts the power of the dominant group in America.”⁶¹ I’d like to juxtapose this quote, which explicitly accepts the misery of isolation and rejects gay collectivity as itself oppressive, with one from *Sinister Wisdom*, a self-published lesbian feminist periodical based in Charlotte, NC but read widely by Durham lesbians:

How do we manage to survive/subvert/create on the boundaries of patriarchal reality? Boundary space by definition is a boundary relation: we exist in the interface between a death culture and the faint beginnings of a culture of -- not humans-- but life-lovers [...] To avoid cooptation, our moving center must remain in the new feminist time/space, despite our necessary relation to that which is still dying. Our aim, the immanent logic of our practice, must be to create ourselves, a new species with power of presence to each other and power of absence to the old, the patriarchal. The distinctive mark of a new species will be the new ways of thinking.⁶²

Written by the editors of the periodical, this quote seems to me to be pretty representative of the attitudes of lesbian-feminists in Durham, including those who left DGA and began organizing amongst themselves. In opposition to the views expressed in the quote before it- from the Gay Morning Star- this passage does not interpret collectivizing apart from

⁶⁰ Barbara Hedman. “I. Fears and Visions.” Gay Morning Star. (April 1974): 2. Print.

⁶¹ “A Personal Statement.” Gay Morning Star. (November 1973): 4. Print.

⁶² “Notes For A Magazine II.” Sinister Wisdom. (July 1976): 31. Print.

dominant (patriarchal) culture as something that reinforces it. The authors believe it entirely possible to craft something original, speaking of ‘beginnings’ and the “new feminist time/space.” They find agency in their mission to survive as distinct from patriarchy, rather than understanding organizing around identity as a futile effort in “self-defense.” Whereas the men seem to find dominant culture so unshakable that they must find commonalities with it in order to survive, the women condemn it as “dying” and believe there is a way to “avoid cooptation.” I find it interesting that the women call patriarchy “death culture” and contrast it with their life-loving community. It once again harks back to Lorde’s understanding of the erotic, as that about us which is creative and sustaining in the face of the lives patriarchy carves out for women, characterized by powerlessness, despair, self-neglect, and self-denial.⁶³

Most notably in contrast to the men, the women explicitly refute calling themselves human and take a strong stance that they are not only “distinctive” but will actively cultivate this distinctiveness and become nothing less than a “new species.” The word species is, again, reminiscent of the understanding of women as special and different from men, but it is one loaded also with a history of taxonomy, both in general and in regards to gays. As Foucault tells us, “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”⁶⁴ This species-ification is precisely what DGA fights against, while for lesbian feminists is a part of their purpose. While members of the Duke Gay Alliance maintained that being sexually interested in those of the same sex was their only difference from straight Duke peers, and aspired to make this true, Donna Giles says “I don’t know

⁶³ Audre. Lorde. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1984. 53-59. Print.

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York, NY, 1978. [trans. by Robert Hurley.] 40. Print.

what it has to do with sex, or if it has anything to do with sex” of being a lesbian.⁶⁵ While this may seem oxymoronic, for these women, the “power of presence to each other and power of absence to the old” revolved around so many other political objectives- like love, solidarity, feminism, and self-growth- that sex, sometimes, was the least important thing gluing them together. Feminist, philosopher, and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray suggests that when women remove themselves from patriarchal culture, they are free to experience “enjoyment without a fee, well-being without pain, pleasure without possession.”⁶⁶ This indeed seems to echo the utopic vision posited by the lesbian feminists writing in *Sinister Wisdom*; they don’t feel beholden to any authority other than themselves, and have no need to interact with forces that damage them. Moreover, what they are creating with each other is so radically nourishing and enriching that it defies reduction to simple sexual orientation.

Refusing to engage with the straight, male-dominated world, lesbians from Duke and in Durham in the 1970s and 80s created a separatist movement instead. They sought a type of community and politics that nurtured them and was characterized by “being responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense,” rather than heeding or adopting the values of the dominant culture.⁶⁷ Gay males at Duke took a completely different approach, desiring access to the privileges being accepted by the institution could afford them. These distinctive strategies- separatist versus integrationist- demonstrate the need to understand the intricate tactics, priorities, language, and motivation of gays and lesbians in their proper historical contexts rather than seeing them as one homosexual monolith, as well as

⁶⁵ Donna Giles. *The Power of This Story: A Public Conversation about Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality in Durham, NC 1960-1990*. Durham County Library, Durham, NC. 3 Apr. 2013. Panel.

⁶⁶ Luce Irigaray. “Commodities among Themselves.” *The Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985. 197. Print.

⁶⁷ Audre Lorde. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1984. 53-59. Print.

the importance of continually taking gender privilege into account in discussions about identity politics.

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